

Selecting the Right Car Seat

Stages of Car Seat Use

Child
Safety
Facts
2013

The **SAFEST** car seat for your child is the one that . . .

Fits your child

Car seats are made for children of average size. Your own child's size and needs may vary. Make sure your child is within the car seat weight and height guidelines. Check labels and instructions.

Fits your car

Not every car seat can be installed correctly in every car. Make sure the car seat fits correctly in your car before using it with your child. If you need help, go to a local car seat inspection station (see Resources).

Is easy for YOU to use correctly every time

Find a child car seat that is easy for you to use properly every time. The easier it is for you to use, the more likely you will use it correctly every time you travel.

Stage 1: Ride Rear Facing...



From birth until baby meets the rear-facing size limit (about 24 months). Look for:

Rear-facing-only car seat: Use rear facing up to 22 to 40 pounds; small and easy to carry.

Convertible car seat: Use rear facing up to 30 to 45 pounds; large, stays in car; can be used forward facing when baby is much older and bigger.

Stage 2: Ride Forward Facing in a Harness...



When over 24 months (at least over age 1 **AND** over 20 pounds), and as long as the harness fits by height and weight. Look for:

Convertible, forward-facing-only seat, built-in child seat, or vest: These fit up to at least 40 pounds; most can be used for children up to 60 to 80 pounds.

Combination seat: Use with the harness up to 40 to 90 pounds; can be used without the harness as a booster seat when child is older and heavier.

Stage 3: Ride in a Booster Seat...



When the child has outgrown a harness but does not yet fit a seat belt (see below); likely to be up to 8 to 12 years old.

Look for one that goes to at least 100 pounds. One without a back is okay if the car has head restraints and the child does not nap while riding. One with a high back (shown) might protect better in side crashes.

A booster must be used with a lap-shoulder belt. If the car has only lap belts, don't use a booster. Instead, find a car seat with a harness that fits the child (see Resources). A car seat is also better for a child who can't sit still in a booster.

Stage 4: Ride in a Lap-Shoulder Belt...

When the belt fits well, usually after 8 to 12 years old. To check fit, use the 5-Step Seat Belt Fit Test (see Resources).

Crash Testing and Ratings

Every kind of child car safety seat (car seat) sold in the United States or Canada is required by law to pass tough crash tests. These tests show what would happen if a car was driven into a brick wall at high speed. This is a much more serious kind of crash than most people will ever be in. Car seats that pass these tests are safe to use.

Most, if not all, car seat makers do more testing than required. They do these tougher crash tests to make sure their car seats are safe.

There are also several rating programs for car seats, such as *Consumer Reports*, *Baby Bargains*, IIHS fit ratings, and the NHTSA Ease-of-Use Ratings. Most programs are based on how easy the testers think the car seats are to use. *Consumer Reports* and IIHS also do some crash testing.

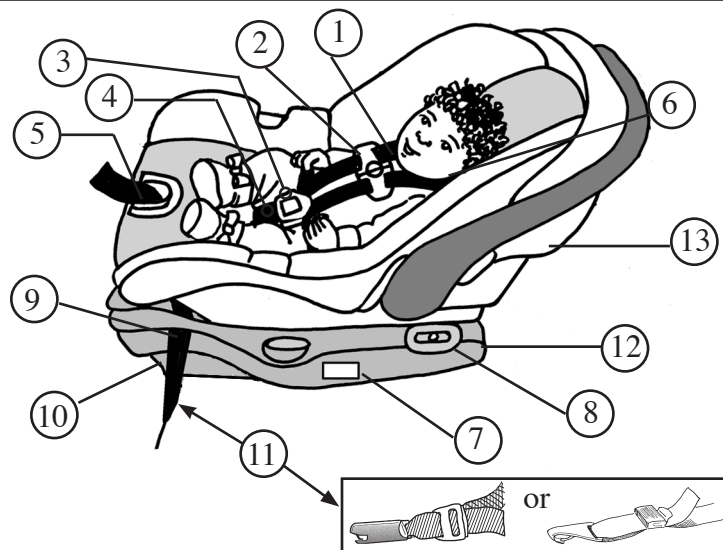
Rating programs can be helpful. Be aware, though, that a "best pick" may not be the best car seat to fit *your* child and *your* car. No car seat can be best for every family situation. Pick the car seat that works well for your child.

See page 2 for more information on choosing a car seat.

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Car Seat Features to Look For

- **Good size limits:** Check labels and the manual for height and weight limits that allow your child to use the car seat for a long time.
 - **For preemies and tiny babies:** A rear-facing car seat that can be used for babies under 5 pounds.
 - **For growing babies:** A car seat that can be used rear facing to at least 30 pounds.
 - **For preschoolers:** A convertible or forward-facing-only car seat that can be used to 50 or more pounds and over 45 inches.
 - **For young school-age children:** A booster that can be used to at least 100 pounds and up to 57 inches.
- **A 5-point harness:** This type has straps over the shoulders, hips, and between the legs. It keeps small babies in position better than a 3-point harness and fits older kids longer than a harness with a shield (tray).
- **Harness buckle:** It should be easy to buckle and unbuckle. Buckles are required to be stiff enough so kids cannot unbuckle them. Caregivers, especially those with arthritis, should find one that is not painful to buckle and unbuckle.
- **Harness adjuster:** A harness that adjusts by pulling a strap at the front of the car seat is easier to use than one that adjusts on the harness or at the back of the car seat.
- **Chest clip:** Check that this clip on the harness is easy to open and close.
- **Seat belt slots (belt path):** The openings for the seat belt or attachment strap should be big enough to fit your hand in easily. Access from the front is helpful.
- **Seat belt lock-off:** Some car seats have a part that locks onto the car's lap or shoulder belt. Check the instructions and make sure the part is easy to use.
- **Lower LATCH connectors:** Check your car manual to see if your car has LATCH. If it does, look for car seats with connectors that are easy for you to use. Connectors that push on and release with a push-button are usually easiest.
- **Angle-of-recline guides (on rear-facing seats):** They should be easy for you to see and understand.
- **Angle adjuster foot (on rear-facing seats):** Make sure it is easy to adjust the tilt of the car seat, such as by moving an adjuster foot on the base. That way, baby's head won't flop forward and keep her from breathing well.



Parts of a car seat:

- | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Harness (5-point) | 6. Shoulder harness slots | 10. Angle adjuster foot |
| 2. Chest clip | 7. Label(s) | 11. LATCH lower attachment strap(s) (detail shows connectors) |
| 3. Buckle | 8. Angle-of-recline guide | 12. Base (infant seats) |
| 4. Crotch strap | 9. Belt path | 13. Shell/carrier |
| 5. Harness adjuster | | |

Try Before You Buy

If possible, take the car seat to your car and install it before buying it. **Always** follow the instructions for the car seat and for the car. Make sure the car seat can be installed tightly. To check this, grab the car seat at the belt path. Pull side to side and forward. It should not move more than one inch.

Check a Second-Hand Car Seat Carefully

A used car seat might have hidden safety problems. Make sure any recalls have been repaired and that the car seat has all its parts and instructions. If the car seat has been in a crash, it should not be used again. If you don't know for sure, don't use it.

Don't use a car seat that is expired—usually when more than 6 years old. Most are marked with an expiration date. **Newer car seats are easier to use and often have better safety features.**

Don't Rush to the Next Stage

Moving too soon to the next stage is a very common mistake. Keep your child in each stage listed on page 1 as long as possible. Don't move to the next stage until your child has grown too tall or heavy to continue riding in his current stage.

Resources

National Auto Safety Hotline: Car seat information, recalls, ratings: 888-327-4236, 800-424-9153(tty), www.safercar.gov

SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.: 5-Step Seat Belt Fit Test, recall list, handouts: 800-745-7233, www.carseat.org

Find a Child Passenger Safety Inspection Location: 866-732-8243, www.seatcheck.org

The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia: www.chop.edu/carseat

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP): www.healthychildren.org (See AAP's product listing to find car seats with high weight limits.)